

4-4-2018

Scattered Feathers

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SCATTERED FEATHERS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art

in

The School of Art

by
Dason Pettit
B.F.A, University of Mississippi, 2013
May 2018

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have to extend my thanks to a number of people who provided invaluable assistance in the construction of this work. The people of Tallulah have been a constant source of assistance in the creation of these photographs. Geneva Williams and John Martin have been kind and generous with their time and resources. This work would not exist without the kind help of the ornithologists of Louisiana State University, and the assistance of Matthew Brady. Likewise, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology was extremely supportive and giving of their resources in the production of this work. Special thanks to John Fitzpatrick and Mike Webster. The University of Mississippi has been instrumental in helping to form this work. Ornithologist Jason Hoekesema in particular has provided assistance in a variety of ways, connecting me to birdwatchers in multiple areas, as well as sharing his facilities for photographic documentation.

I want to specifically thank all the birdwatchers that I have met over the course of making this work. In your pursuits I see myself, and in your work I see a noble and worthwhile venture. Godspeed to you all. A very special thanks to Jerry Siegel and the Baton Rouge Audubon Society for being so accepting of my presence during your excursions.

Many thanks to my thesis committee. This body of work would not be what it is without your perceptive and knowing advice and guidance. Your contributions have helped to shape this work in vital ways. Thanks to Vincent Celluci for all of your valuable support.

I would like to sincerely thank the LSU photographic faculty for helpful input and guidance over the last three years. My time as a graduate student at LSU has been filled with insightful instruction from a truly gifted and brilliant group of diverse artists. Thank you Johanna Warwick for never failing to push me into new territory and keeping me focused when I really needed it. Much thanks to Kristine Thompson for always encouraging me with your empathy and courage as an artist. You continue to be a source of inspiration.

I extend a heartfelt thanks to my chair and photographic mentor, Jeremiah Ariaz. It was your work that inspired me to pursue the ideas that have become my thesis project and for that I will always be grateful. Your photographs and methods have been the catalyst that spurred in me a new way of working that I hope will continue to grow for many years to come.

Lastly, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude that can never be fully repaid to my family. My mother and dear grandparents never wavered in their support of my artistic growth. Many thanks to Malcolm Gooch for his artistic insight and great imagination. To Peggy Day, all the thanks in the world for your unending patience and for listening to me when I thought I had lost my way with my work. My partner, Lainy Day has been the most unwavering champion of my work. She is the bright light in the darkness of doubt, a true and loving force guiding my mind, my sight and my heart.

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ABSTRACT

Scattered Feathers is the story of a ghost that lives in the imagination now: the ivory-billed woodpecker. Those that know this bird call it the God Bird or Grail Bird because of its mythic stature. This thesis is also a story about the loss and obsession that can fuel human pursuits. It is a study in observation and subsequent mythmaking, an examination of extinction and preservation. Perhaps most of all it is a chronicle of entropy and the cyclical nature of our existence. The visual work herein examines the mythos of the ivory-billed woodpecker, its once pristine environment and the act of searching for an extinct species. Some disciples are certain that the ivory-billed woodpecker has recently been spotted in the forests surrounding Tallulah, Louisiana and other sites in Florida and Arkansas after a nearly 70-year absence due to deforestation. The tantalizing evidence, reminiscent of other mythical controversies, spurred an intense search by researchers and enthusiasts attempting to document the reemergence of an extinct species. Sightings have been made but never substantiated conclusively. The God Bird is a specter that haunts the forests and the fields around Tallulah, it is a divine messenger heard only by the faithful. It serves as a symbol of human existential dilemma and as a cautionary tale for all endangered species. The ivory-billed woodpecker is also an entryway into the worlds of avian observation and conservation, acts that provide insight into the history of the Mississippi Delta and the ever-present tension between growth and oblivion that is manifest there, and wherever man seeks to overtake nature.

INTRODUCTION

The small community of Tallulah, LA was at the epicenter of logging activity in the Southern U.S. in the early 20th century and the ivory-billed woodpecker, already an endangered species by the 1930's, suffered further during this time. The logging industry, represented at the time in Louisiana by the Chicago Mill, set to work clear cutting the area known as the Singer Tract. The lumber was then sent to the mill they built on the outskirts of Tallulah. The fallout from these actions left little of the habitat that the Ivory-billed Woodpecker needed to survive. No care was given to preserving the indigenous wildlife of the region or the ecosystem that sustained it. Wolves, wildcats, and bears all began to decline drastically in number. The primeval forest landscape melted away, replaced by vast oceans of farmland, the result of an agricultural revolution throughout the Mississippi Delta, the effects of which would be felt for generations to come.

Initially, in the beginning stages of this project, I was looking for a mythos that mirrored my own existential concerns. Tim Gallagher's book, *The Grail Bird* had granted me an intriguing glimpse into the hunt for an endangered species that mirrored my own search for meaning. Dr. Gallagher's focus was unwavering and seemed to hinge on faith that the bird could still be found and documented. This was fuel for my own project: an investigation centered around questions of human necessity and progress and how these drives had at their core a dark irony that revealed a self-destructive impulse at work.

There is a kind of entropy that emerges through human endeavor in which we can see echoes of the past repeating as we move through time.

This photographic survey ultimately grew out of a compulsion on my part to examine the presence of death and how we deal with the inevitability of our own mortality by way of either acceptance or denial. As humans, we have a tendency to ignore or fail to act upon catastrophic changes in the environment. These concerns about environmental fragility and our culpability in it led me to endangered species and the ivory-billed woodpecker. I like to believe that the God Bird ushered me into the woods and led me to these searchers. The resulting work evolved from the mindful observation of those who study birds and the environment that continues to shift around them.

I

Bird watchers fascinate me. Waking before dawn, rigorous preparation, meticulous planning: such things are the essential needs for the successful birder. As such, the life of a birdwatcher is a life well considered. That necessary attention to detail is a quality that I admire and aim for in my own pursuits and a reason that I am drawn to them. Their manner is obsessive and their focus resolute as they spread out through the forest. Lowering their binoculars, they make note of each sighting, of every movement. They record what type of bird and how many, what the weather was like and what time of day they spotted a particular species. Their goal is singular though. They seek that one special bird, the one that will fulfill them until the next excursion. The species is different for every birdwatcher, but when they find it, their faces soften and often exhibit a kind of rapturous ecstasy, and in that moment their thirst is quenched. The promise of discovery and completion drives the birdwatcher. I see myself reflected in that pursuit, an artist in search of scenes, moments both transcendental and sublime in which I find fulfillment (image 1).



Image 1. *The Hunting Party*, 2018.

I have been watching birds as well but I have failed to see them. If I considered birds in the past, it was because I wanted to become them in an act of transformation and liberation. Birds are perhaps the wild animals that we observe the most in our day to day lives, and because of that, we take them for granted, imagining that they will continue to persist against any and all obstacles, even those we impose upon them. But too often they do not survive, they do not adapt to our constructed worlds. Author Tim Gallagher recounts a moment of heartbreak in his book, *The Grail Bird*, when he describes an Ivory-billed Woodpecker and her offspring seeking sanctuary in a downed tree during the post-clear cut burning of timber¹. When I read about this scene it seemed absolutely apocalyptic and remained etched in my mind's eye, a vivid reminder of mans' capacity for neglect.

¹ Tim Gallagher, *The Grail Bird*.

² Martha Langford. *Scissors, Paper, Stone*, p158.

Most accounts of the ivory-billed are extremely detailed, and point out that no lifeless specimen of the bird can compare with the way it moved in reality, the way it breathed, the way it flew. It was said to have been magnificent and truly unlike any other bird. As I read more about the ivory-billed, I longed to see one in the wild, to meet this totemic bird, to experience its grandeur. This impulse led me to back to the Delta, the town of Tallulah and the Singer Tract.

I spent long periods in observation blinds, waiting and watching (Image 2). The forest would seem to sigh at times, and I would hold my breath when I heard the tap, tap, tap of a woodpecker. I didn't see the bird, but the more I looked, the more I became a believer that the hunt for the ivory-billed woodpecker was valid. In this act of searching was meaning even if I never spotted the bird. In these forests there was solitude and something transcendent in the air that quieted my mind. The trees seemed to hold secrets and there was a sense that the God Bird was watching. It was like being home again.



Image 2. *Among the Trees*, 2018.

II

At the same time as I began to make excursions into the woods of the Singer Tract, I also felt a strong urge to see how and where the bird had been preserved. I wanted to see what was left of what had at one time been, according to most who had seen one, the most magnificent of birds, majestic and grand. So I began to visit the labs and storage facilities at both the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the Louisiana State University Natural History Museum.

The birds in these institutions are rarely removed from the cabinets that permanently house them and they exist in a strange state of suspension (Image 3). They are dead, but somehow they seem to still live on, reminders of what they once were and what has been done to them. They are memento mori, at once both a cause and an effect of our own hand, a reminder of life and death.

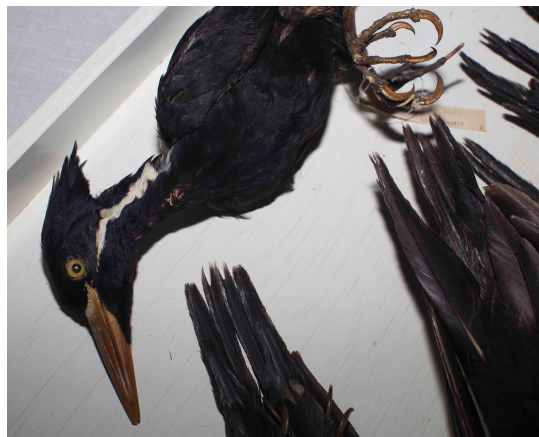


Image 3. *And Yet I Live*, 2017.

The conservation efforts of ornithologists hinge on collection and preservation of species for the purpose of study, as well as posterity. If it were not for the efforts of these scientists there might be no ivory-billed woodpecker specimens to examine. The process of skinning, deconstructing and reconstructing these birds is referred to as specimen preparation. It is a careful practice that requires knowledge, skill and much patience (image 4). Hundreds of hours go into the practice of preparing these birds.



Image 4. *Oblivion*, 2017.

Having observed several of these specimen preps, it seems like this is the ultimate meditation on the fate of avian species, especially those that are endangered. As in so many instances, the way to conserve is to deconstruct and then create what amounts to a facsimile of the original bird. This taxidermy is no doubt useful, but at the core of the activity there exists a paradox: the act of preserving has actually transformed the bird. The bird can never exist as it was. On the surface the specimen may appear very much like it was, but something is different, not right. The eyes become indicators. The eyes of these birds cannot be preserved and are therefore replaced with glass replicas for use in

display or they are simply left eyeless when placed in storage (image 5). They are shells that resemble birds, but what they are made to mimic can never be present again. Instead they have become a type of artifice, a false memory that pervades our understanding of the species.



Image 5. *Blindness*, 2017.

III

Like the bird specimens themselves, the land that was once the habitat for the God Bird is charged with energy. Often, I am the only person in the woods, surrounded by birds, hearing them, feeling them, but unable to see them. It often feels like the forest is a huge lab, an observatory for investigating cause and effect. All that you have to do is take the time to look. It is a place filled with signs and markings, evidence that the bird was once here. These forms are also symbols of the transitory nature of life. These photographs that detail the nesting sites that the woodpeckers create are illustrative of the passage of time (image 6). Many of the trees used by the woodpeckers are only standing because they are supported by other stronger, living trees.



Image 6. *Shadows and Scars*, 2018.

The tree husks that remain echo the forms of empty buildings in the nearby town of Tallulah, and are testament to the decline that is an intrinsic part of nature. The marks

in these trees are also evidence of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker's past existence. The repetitive nature of the chipped wood highlights the passage of time and the caustic elements that are a necessary part of change within nature (image 7).



Image 7. *Undertow*, 2018.

On the periphery of Tallulah is the Chicago Mill, the chief agent in the destruction of the ancient forests that housed the ivory-billed woodpecker. The Chicago Mill came to the area surrounding Tallulah in the 1930's and proceeded to cut down almost all of the hardwood forest. When the job was finished, the mill left Tallulah and in there absence many of the jobs that they had created disappeared. The mill was the killer in the mythology of the God Bird and it persists still, a stain that cannot be erased.

I have to wade through thick bracken to make my way to the main structure of the mill. It now only exists as a shell of its former self, a demon that refuses to loosen its grip on this place. Winter is the only time I can access the remnants of the mill. There is no path and it becomes difficult to keep my bearings. Much like being in a maze, I become disoriented and often feel like turning back. But eventually I clear the brush and the

ruined visage of the mill becomes visible. It is like stepping back in time. You can almost hear the sounds of this place, the saws buzzing, echoing through time. It is a strange place that seems to stand somewhere outside the rest of the town.

The continued survival of woodpecker species depends on an abundance of suitable trees, whereas our progress has often hinged on the hunt for timber, an act that has left the land permanently transformed (image 8). The ironic nature of these two diametrically opposed ideas underscores the correlation between human and avian crises.



Image 8. *Harbinger*, 2018.

IV

Most of the earth of the Mississippi Delta is a transformed and scarred terrain, a mirror of the vast terraforming that took place here in the early twentieth century. Spending time in these woods heightens the fear that this environment might not persist. The depths of the forest still whisper the truth that this is a fragile place. There is the unmistakable sense that this world is transient, always in a state of alteration, and due to human presence, always on the cusp of oblivion.

Existential tensions are at the center of our history as humans. In crisis we often become our own enemy, creating and solving problems in the never-ending circle of our lives. Ours is a riddle of significance in which, for every victory we make, we must also suffer a series of defeats and with all meaning that we gather we must also face the possibility that our efforts may not have larger implications.

For me, at the center of this conflict is the God Bird, a doomed symbol of the beauty of the natural world and its fragile position in reality. The ivory-billed woodpecker is a symbol of something more than endangered species. It serves as an illustration of the contradictions of human progress, as well as the internal struggle within all of us to find a sense of purpose. We look for what we cannot see because we need to believe in something greater than ourselves. This movement toward meaning is the beating heart of my narrative. The journey is the strand through which these encounters coalesce and begin to reveal a coded mythology.

My growing fascination with birds and the ivory-billed woodpecker in specific signify something more to me, something tied into my own existence, my own history.

There is an autobiographical aspect inherent within these images. A reminder of my past as a resident of the Mississippi Delta and a glimpse of my ongoing internal spiritual struggle emerge in the photographs. There is a comingling of past and present; dual lives converging in the same place.

Likewise, in the dissections and subtle transformations of these birds I see echoes of my concern about the human condition and the metaphysical questions that accompany any examination of that state. The unanswerable inquiries are the ones that resonate the most with me. Why are we here and what happens to us after death are questions that may have no answer. Or perhaps the answer lies outside of any perspective we can understand. Are our struggles in vain or do they serve a larger purpose, much like the struggle of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker?

V

If the act of seeing is somehow equivalent to a kind remembrance, then my investigation of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker and the act of bird watching has been about more than one type of remembrance. In her book, *Scissors, Paper, Stone*, author Martha Langford talks about photographer Sylvie Readman's approach to memory in her work:

Readman was drawn to places that reminded her of images that she had previously appropriated, she was struck by her unshakeable visual habits and forced to consider the possibility that her theoretical investigation had somehow been driven by lifelong attractions to certain visual formations that she had in effect been working from memory at every stage.²

This idea signifies one type of recollection within my work, that of individual insight colored by an intermingling of imagination and memory. In this way, the photographs function as metaphors of past experiences in my life. They are reflections of my own search for meaning. Like Readman's realization that she had always been working from her own recollection, I find myself inevitably revisiting past experiences and emotions through the depiction of actual places. The image of the birdwatcher in blue is an image not only indicative of the search for meaning, but also harkens to memories of hunters from my childhood (image 9). Two interconnected narratives weave together and form a picture of past and present, emotional and literal representation.

² Martha Langford. *Scissors, Paper, Stone*, p158.



Image 9. *Stalker*, 2018.

The idea of the photograph as a subjective piece of information or even a reflection of the workings of the artist's mind is not a new one. Novelist W. G. Sebald made use of photographs in his books as a tool to further enhance the text. Author Silke Horstkotte speaks of the photographs in Sebald's novel, *The Rings of Saturn* as being indicative of individual mental constructs in the narrator's psyche rather than actual physical representations within the framework of the account.³ This conceptual mode of approaching photography within a narrative eludes the more common and straightforward reading of images as only documents and opens them up to a more subjective understanding by the viewer.

At the same time, the photographs are documents, physical recordings of a physical world. This interpretation becomes critical in decyphering the subject matter in the photographs, but such an analysis alone misses the larger picture that the images open up for a viewer: the image as symbol and collective memory. The photographs invite the

³ Silke Horstkotte. *Visual Memory and Ekphrasis in W. G. Sebald's The Rings of Saturn*, p118.

viewer into dialogue with their own memories and encourage more than one reading regarding the relationships between the images.

John Szarkowski seems to confirm this viewpoint when he says in *Mirrors and Windows* that, “all photography exists on a continuum – those that live near the center can be shifted by the viewer to either side of an imaginary axis.”⁴ Photographs that inhabit this indistinct area of the imagination can be moved to another point within the narrative by our imagination. This is an essential idea in Langford’s book as well. She states that, “photography makes time and space for serious mental play. Both memory and imagination are quickened in the process.”⁵ This space is crucial in my work as well. A viewer needs a pause or a break to consider the photographs and look beyond their explicit meaning. In this space, the viewer is able to further associate the images on multiple levels of meaning

The importance of imagination within the context of this work is further reinforced by the use of fragmentation within the photographic series. The obstruction of the narrative is a necessary part of the series and inherent in an elliptical photographic structure. Piecing together the story involves taking disparate images or series of images and filling in the spaces between them with your own visualizations of subsequent or adjacent events. Susan Sontag, in speaking of the photograph as memento mori, also refers to it as a fragment, an idea that can be read in different ways as time passes.⁶

All this is to say that while the camera may capture reality, we cannot experience it as such. Our perceptions are the key to interpreting our journeys. This body of work

⁴ John Szarkowski. *Mirrors and Windows*, p 25.

⁵ Langford. p 103.

⁶ Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. p 71.

becomes not only about sifting through the narrative of the God Bird and the searchers,
but also about finding my own place as an observer and a participant within this story.

CONCLUSION

The erosion of the landscape by human means irrevocably altered the habitat of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Actions like these have led to the implementation of systematic conservation methods. These methods, while helping to raise public awareness, have also led to a distortion of perceptions about endangered species.

Within this world of conservation, the act of observation stands apart for me. Bird watching is an action that is separate from intervention. It is the act of seeing that most intrigues me. As in photography, observation, not just seeing, helps us to understand the world we live in.

The acts of watching, archiving and remembering are critical in constructing this work as a meditation on the fragility of existence. Our memories are mutable, our experience subject to alteration. Like the ivory-billed woodpecker, our existence is constantly in peril. We live our lives under the threat of multiple existential problems.

The examination of the narrative of the ivory-billed woodpecker has exposed these philosophical concerns for me. Inside that story, our own existence and meaning is interwoven. The cyclical nature of our lives becomes more transparent in this context and the paradox of our actions clearer. For every problem we look for a solution and with that solution we create another set of obstructions.

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VITA

Dason Pettit is a visual artist working primarily in the fields of photography and cinematography. His work is informed by a lifelong study of cinema and the use of the elliptical narrative in both cinematic and photographic work. With a background as both a painter and a filmmaker, he focuses on the subtle use of color as a supplement to thematic concerns in his work. In recent years, his style has evolved to include documentary aspects of photography and he balances his work on that precarious point between reality and fiction. Inspired by the form of the novel, his photographs reference literature and poetry in an attempt to craft a more open-ended approach to his subject matter. Mr. Pettit holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts with an emphasis in photo imaging from the University of Mississippi. He expects to receive a Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts with a Photography Emphasis from Louisiana State University in May of 2018.